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title of presentation, that each should increase his means in proportion to his diligence, or bodily strength, or other qualifications. In fine, political government requires that each should enjoy what belongs to him.

Within this economy, people are to exercise their callings responsibly, be grateful to God for all good things that come to them, practice stewardship and display generosity (rather than avarice and prodigality). Far from advocating egalitarianism, Calvin believed that God willed economic inequality (within limits) to provide occasions for the exercise of charity.

While the Hutterites relegated trade to their list of forbidden professions, in the belief that ‘as a nail sticketh fast between door and hinge; so doth sin stick close between buying and selling’, Calvin viewed commerce as ‘necessary for the realization of the harmonious social order which God has prescribed’. Economic relations can reflect human perversity, but they ought to be organized to mirror God’s desire for the restoration of harmony and order in society.

In sum, Calvin’s all-encompassing social vision, coupled with his [p. 245](#) convictions about moderation and the basic harmony between the universal moral law of the Decalogue and the teachings of Jesus, enabled him to lay out an economic model for an entire society, believers and unbelievers alike. The Hutterites, stressing the radicality of Jesus’ words on money and property, constructed an economic model for a radical minority, a separate society whose interaction with unbelievers was limited to mission work and contacts necessary to maintain community life. Certainly both Calvin and the Hutterites grounded their understandings of the relationship between the church and the wider social order in Scripture. It is also evident that their convictions about church and society reacted on their readings of the texts we have examined—in Calvin’s case moderating and extending them into an economic ethic for a whole society, in the Hutterites’ case further radicalizing them to support a complete communism of production and consumption practised only by the community of saints.

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Good News For The Poor

Elsa Tamez

*Reprinted from the book Bible of the Oppressed by the same author
(Orbis Books: New York, 1983) with permission*

This is a theological analysis of poverty from a Latin American Christian—though referring to all the important passages in the Bible on the subject, the article however bases its analysis on rather an unlikely passage—[Luke 2:10](#), ‘I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people’. The direct application of the passage to the Latin American economical situation makes absorbing reading.

Editor

I bring you good news
of a great joy which will come
to all the people

[\[Luke 2:10\]](#).

In the first century A.D. the ordinary people of Palestine found themselves in extremely difficult circumstances. Like all Jews they had to pay heavy taxes to the Roman Empire; in addition, they suffered greatly from the inflation that was prevalent from Egypt to Syria. In the cities there was growing unemployment, and slavery was on the increase. For these reasons, slaves and farm workers abandoned their places and formed robber bands to prey on the caravans of traders and pilgrims.¹

Meanwhile, there was another social class that did not suffer from this situation but, on the contrary, possessed economic and political power in Palestine and profited from inflation. These were the people who formed the council of elders (generally, men from the noble and powerful families), the chief priests, the great landowners, the rich merchants, and others who exercised some political and ideological control (the scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees). This class collaborated with the Roman Empire and acted in ways hostile to the masses of the people. Its members were the open enemies of the Zealots, a guerilla group that wanted to take power and drive out the Romans.²

It was in this historical context that the Good News came. [p. 247](#)

In Latin America there are also great masses of people who live in extremely difficult circumstances. Inflation is a very serious problem in almost all the countries of this part of the Third World, and it is evident that its effects bear most heavily on the masses, that is, the poor.

Other serious problems the poor have to face are unemployment, lack of housing, malnutrition, extreme indigence, exploitation.

On the other hand, there is a group that is small by comparison with the population as a whole, but that nonetheless has great economic and political power. Some in this group exploit the proletariat in order to accumulate capital; others derive great profit by becoming partners in foreign companies or by enabling the latter to operate freely in Latin America.

The ruling class, as in first-century Palestine, collaborates in the expansion of the wealthy nations. Latin American countries governed by the military receive weapons from abroad in order to put down the discontented masses. In some Latin American countries governments favour the entrance of the multinational corporations on the pretext that this will foster industrial development.

At the international level, the economies of the Latin American countries are dependent on foreign nations and are structured according to the interests of the wealthy nations of the world. As everyone knows, these nations see Latin America as a source of raw material and cheap labour.

In such a situation the poor feel oppressed; they are hard put to breathe and stay alive. Extreme poverty and exploitation are killing them. They are forced to rise up and fight for the life of the masses.

At this moment in history good news is urgently needed.

¹ Fernando Belo, *Uma Leitura Política do Evangelho* (Lisbon: Multinova, 1974), p. 43. In English see Belo's *A Materialistic Reading of the Gospel of Mark*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1981).

² *Ibid.*, pp. 37 and 44.

THE GOOD NEWS

The Good News takes a very concrete form. The central message is this: the situation cannot continue as it is; impoverishment and exploitation are not God's will; but now there is hope, resurrection, life, change. The reign of God, which is the reign of justice, is at hand.

We have often been told that the message contained in the Good News is that Christ came into the world to save us or free us from sin. But sin is identified with those actions that society considers immoral; drug taking, adultery, excessive drinking, and so on. Thus the gospel of life is reduced to a simple behavioural change.

But the Good News cannot be so reduced. After all, any non-Christian religion can propose that kind of moral teaching, which amounts to nothing but a set of patches designed to cover over the [p.248](#) great sin that lies underneath: oppression at the national and international, the individual and collective levels.

The message of the Good News is of the liberation of human beings from everything and everyone that keeps them enslaved. That is why the Good News brings joy and hope.

Mary, the humble mother of Jesus, sang this song when she visited her cousin Elizabeth:

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden ...
He has shown strength with his arm,
He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts,
He has put down the mighty from their thrones,
and exalted those of low degree;
He has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich He has sent empty away ...

[[Luke 1:46-53](#)].

Mary is here speaking not of individuals undergoing moral change but of the restructuring of the order in which there are rich and poor, mighty and lowly (vv. [52-53](#)).

The priest Zechariah likewise saw the Good News as the fulfillment of the promise of liberation:

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for He has visited and redeemed his people,
and has raised up a horn of salvation for us ...,
as He spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
that we should be saved from our enemies,
and from the hand of all who hate us

[[Luke 1:68-71](#)].

The news is therefore good news to the people; it is a reason for joy and gladness, since it gives the hope of a total change. In [Luke 2:10](#) a messenger of the Lord tells the shepherds: 'I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people'.

The Good News is evidently not so good for some people. King Herod was deeply concerned when they told him that the king of the Jews had been born. We are told that because he feared to lose his throne he ordered the killing of all children in Bethlehem who were less than two years old ([Matt. 2:16](#)).

The shepherds, on the other hand, rejoiced when they heard the News. The shepherds were men who lived in the fields and took turns watching over their flocks at night ([Luke](#)

[2:10](#)). They enjoyed little respect because they were part of the masses. When they received the [p. 249](#) Good News, they were glad; they listened to it and shared it with others.

The Good News that speaks of the liberation of the oppressed cannot be pleasing to the oppressors, who want to go on exploiting the poor. But the Good News is indeed good to those who want to change and to see a more just society.

For the most part, those who want to live in a society in which justice and peace reign are those who suffer hunger, oppression, poverty. For this reason the Good News is directed especially to the poor. Jesus himself said so when he read from the Book of Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to *preach good news to the poor*.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.

[\[Luke 4:18-19\]](#)

Then he added: 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing' ([Luke 4:21](#)).

THE POOR

Knowing, then, that the Good News is addressed especially to the poor, let us reflect on who the poor are and why they are poor.

For many centuries now the biblical passages on the poor have been spiritualized and distorted. Poverty is regarded as a virtue, as an abstract quality that can be attributed to rich and poor alike. As a result, a rich person can be understood to be poor 'in spirit', and a poor person rich 'in spirit'.

The beatitudes that Jesus addressed to the poor have been read as referring to something spiritual. In this distorted view, the 'poor in spirit' may be:

1. those who have accepted (material) poverty voluntarily and without protest;
2. those who, though rich, are not proud but rather act humbly before God and their fellows (neither the riches nor the way they have been acquired are an *obstacle* to acting humbly);
3. those who are restless spirits and lack any element of the mystical in their religious outlook.

And yet, when Jesus reads the promise now fulfilled in him: 'He anointed me to preach good news to the poor', he is referring to all those who lack the basic necessities of life. When he says: 'Blessed are [p. 250](#) you poor' ([Luke 6:20](#)), he is referring to material poverty. The poor in spirit are the 'poor of Yahweh', that is, they are the poor and oppressed who acknowledge their poverty, and who stand before God as poor people. In other words, they are not the kind of poor people who think, and try to live, as members of the bourgeoisie.

To sum up: the poor in the Bible are the helpless, the indigent, the hungry, the oppressed, the needy, the humiliated. And it is not nature that has put them in this situation; they have been unjustly impoverished and despoiled by the powerful.

In the Old Testament there are a number of Hebrew words that are often translated by 'poor':³

1. *'ani* in its most fully developed use describes a situation of inferiority in relation to another. Concretely the *'ani* is one who is dependent. When used in combination with *dal* it describes an economic relationship. The contrary of the *'ani* is the oppressor or user of violence. God is protector of the *'anim* because they are people who have been impoverished through injustice;

2. *dal* is used in two senses: it may refer either to physical weakness or to a lowly, insignificant position in society;

3. *'ebion* often refers to those who are very poor and in a wretched state. Originally it meant someone who asks for alms, a beggar;

4. *rash* is the poor or needy person; its antithesis is the rich person. The social and economic meaning is the prominent one;

5. *miskin* means 'dependent', a social inferior.

I have listed these Hebrew words with their connotations in order to show that according to almost all of them the poor are individuals who are inferior to the rich or the powerful. Their situation is not the result of chance but is due to the action of oppressors. This point is brought out in many passages of the Bible: 'They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes—they that trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and turn aside the way of the afflicted' ([Amos 2:6-7](#)); 'The people of the land [or: the landowners] have practised extortion and committed robbery; they have oppressed the poor and needy, and have extorted from the sojourner without redress' ([Ezek. 22:29](#)).

There is evidently no need to reread the entire Bible in order to discover that poor persons are those who do not have the wherewithal to live because their means have been snatched away. p. 251

The authorities, for their part, frequently prove to be on the side of injustice. They close their eyes to the sinful activities of the powerful, and their role is, in fact, to maintain this order of things. Isaiah denounces them: 'Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. ... They do not defend the fatherless, and the widow's cause does not come to them' ([Isa. 1:23](#)).

Orphans and widows were listed among the poor and helpless, because they had no one to defend them and no means of subsistence.

The accumulation of wealth is incompatible with Christianity, since any accumulation of possessions is at the cost of the very poor. The denunciation pronounced by Jeremiah is very clear: 'Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbour serve him for nothing, and does not give him his wages' ([Jer. 22:13](#)).

The New Testament also launches a strong attack on those who heap up possessions:

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches [i.e., hoards] have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you and you will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Behold, the wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure;

³ Julio de Santa Ana, *Good News to the Poor: The Challenge of the Poor in the History of the Church*, trans. Helen Whittle (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979), p. 10, n. 1.

you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned, you have killed the righteous man; he does not resist you [[James 5:1-6](#)].

At this point we are in a position to infer two points about the poor as seen by the Bible. First, poverty is regarded as something decidedly negative; it is 'a scandalous condition' and the manifestation of 'a degrading human condition'.⁴ Secondly, this situation of poverty is not the result of some historical inevitability nor is it 'just the way things are'; it is, as we saw in Part I, the result of the unjust actions of oppressors.⁵

BLESSED ARE THE POOR

God, of course, is not indifferent toward situations of injustice. God takes sides and comes on the scene as one who favours the poor, those **P. 252** who make up the masses of the people. The Bible makes perfectly clear this divine predilection and option for the poor.

The poor alone are worthy to take part in the kingdom of God. Unless the rich break with their way of life, they cannot enter this kingdom. Zacchaeus, who was a chief tax collector and a very rich man, had to give half of his goods to the poor and pay a fourfold recompense to those he had exploited. We see a quite different response in the case of the rich young man whom Christ calls: he has the opportunity to share in the kingdom of God, but since he cannot detach himself from his possessions and give them to the poor, there is no place for him in the kingdom. With reason does Christ say: 'Truly, I say to you, it will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God' ([Matt. 19:23-24](#)).

In Chapter [6](#) of Luke's Gospel we find contrasting but parallel statements that are part of Jesus' teachings to his followers:

Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God [v. [20](#)].

But woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation [v. [24](#)].

Blessed are you, that hunger now, for you shall be satisfied [v. [21](#)].

Woe to you that are full now, for you shall hunger [v. [25](#)].

Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh [v. [21](#)].

Woe to you that laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep [v. [25](#)].

The reason why the Bible opposes the rich is not because they are rich, but because they have acquired their riches at the expense of their neighbours ([James 5:1-6](#)).

Chapter [5](#) of Matthew's Gospel contains further beatitudes for the poor:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven

⁴ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1973), pp. 291-92.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 292-93.

[[Matt. 5:3-10](#)].

God identifies himself with the poor to such an extent that their rights become the rights of God himself: 'he who oppresses a poor [p. 253](#) man insults his Maker, but he who is kind to the needy honours him' ([Prov. 14:31](#)); 'he who mocks the poor insults his Maker; he who is glad at calamity will not go unpunished' ([Prov. 17:5](#)).

It is clear that these many passages of the Bible in favour of the poor are in serious danger of being subjected to another kind of spiritualization: that of calling upon the poor to be satisfied with their state, not of poverty as such, but of privilege in God's sight. This would be disastrous because then even the rich would feel tempted to experience certain wants in order that they too might be God's favourites. Then the situation of injustice that God condemns would be alleviated in the eyes of the world.

We must always keep in mind, therefore, that poverty is an unworthy state that must be changed. I repeat: poverty is not a virtue but an evil that reflects the socioeconomic conditions of inequality in which people live. Poverty is a challenge to God the Creator; because of the insufferable conditions under which the poor live, God is obliged to fight at their side.

In Latin America the poor are blessed, but the reason is not that they have resigned themselves to poverty but, on the contrary, that they cry out and struggle and have their mouths shut for them on the grounds that 'they are rebels and have recourse to violence'. They are blessed, but not because they voluntarily seek to be poor, for it is the mode of production forced upon Latin America that leads them to penury. They are blessed, but not because they have scorned riches; on the contrary, it is they themselves who have been scorned by those who monopolize the world's riches.

The poor in Latin America are blessed because the reign of God is at hand and because the eschatological promise of justice is drawing ever nearer to fulfillment and, with it, the end of poverty.

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Poverty is Powerlessness

Chandrakant Shourie

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This article specially pertains to the Indian context. Doing theology is a risky business. Involvement in the context can alter one's theology with far reaching effects as evidenced by the present effort. Struggling against the injustice done to the farmers by the allied businessmen and quasi-government officials, Shourie's theologizing rapidly turns to an action programme, perhaps inevitably so. (The following is only an abstract of the theologization process and not of the action). Whatever one might say concerning the outcome of such an effort, the burning relevancy of the following pages cannot be denied.

Editor